



# Parenting in the Context of Domestic Violence

Judicial Council of California, Administrative Office of the Courts

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## Directions for Future Inquiry

The clinical and research literature on parenting in the context of violence is growing rapidly. Yet many key questions remain unanswered. It is important to conduct and use research to support existing and future evidence-based practices. The following points, summarized by the staff at the Center for Families, Children & the Courts (CFCC)<sup>1</sup> highlight the directions for future research. Please see the full report<sup>2</sup> for a more in-depth discussion of parenting in the context of domestic violence.

### Gaps in Current Literature

Future inquiry should extend our knowledge to understudied populations. Comparative approaches will help to determine what works best in specific situations. By comparing diverse groups of women, evidence-based programs specific to various sub-samples could be developed. Much of the existing research is based on the experiences of women in battered women shelters. Programs should consider whether parenting behaviors among battered women not residing in a shelter differ from women living in shelters. How else are these populations similar or different? Future research could also compare high-conflict but nonviolent families to families experiencing domestic violence. Such findings would allow for the creation of policies and interventions appropriate for a wide range of battered women, high-conflict families, or a specific subset of battered women. Most research has not distinguished between these groups and it is crucial to understand these differences to create policies and programs based on empirical data.

Future programs should incorporate racial and ethnic differences in parenting and domestic violence programs. Cultural variations are significant across issues of gender relationships, parenting, and utilization of social services and court services. This is especially important in California where courts and intervention programs will see an increasingly diverse group of families coming before them in the next decade. More than a quarter of California's current residents are foreign born (Census Bureau, 2000)<sup>3</sup>. To create evidence-based programs sensitive to all families, additional research is necessary. Along the same lines, more research is needed to create empirically supported parenting programs for perpetrators. Little is known about perpetrators' self-assessments of their parenting. How do they perceive the effects of their violence on their children? How do they respond to parenting programs? Including the perspective of domestic violence perpetrators in research is critical in order to construct appropriate interventions. It is important to note that

<sup>1</sup> The Center for Families, Children and the Courts generates and distributes research-based information that has promise for informing the work of family court services in California and nationwide. To learn more about the work of our office and to see more research updates, visit our Web site: <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc>. Or contact Administrative Office of the Courts, The Center for Families, Children & the Courts, 455 Golden Gate Avenue, 6<sup>th</sup> Floor, San Francisco, CA 94102-3688.

The views expressed in this research update are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the Judicial Council of California or the Administrative Office of the Courts.

<sup>2</sup> Edleson, Jeffrey L., Mbilinyi, Lyungai F., Shetty, Sudha. (2003). *Parenting in the Context of Domestic Violence*. San Francisco: Judicial Council of California, Administrative Office of the Courts, Center for Families, Children & the Courts. Available at <http://www.courtinfo.ca.gov/programs/cfcc/resources/publications>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts. (2002). Data derived from Population Estimates, 2000 Census of Population and Housing. Retrieved April 15, 2003 from Quickfacts from the U.S. Census via QuickFacts <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06000.html>.

most of the existing data are from perpetrators who complete treatment programs, thus, little is known about perpetrators who drop out of treatment programs.

Evidence-based programs are needed to address the effects of violence on children. Researchers must first examine issues such as whether the effects on children differ according to whether they were a witness to domestic violence or a victim of abuse themselves or both. Do the effects vary by exposure or involvement in violence or a combination of these? Programs designed for children could benefit from more information about the likely cumulative and interaction effects that influence parenting in the context of violence. For example, what is the combined effect on children of violent behavior by one parent and the victimization of the other parent? Does this effect change over time? Are there factors that mediate these effects, such as protective behavior by the mother, siblings or other household members? All of these areas are relatively unexplored and would provide valuable information to judicial officers, mediators, evaluators, and other court staff.

## **Tools and Instrument Development**

Courts could also benefit from evidence-based standardized measures to assess the parenting of both perpetrators and victims of domestic violence. Another development beneficial to the field would be the creation of data-derived risk tools to assess childhood exposure to domestic violence and the impact of that exposure. Some guidelines have recently been published based on practice experience, but the further refinement and evaluation of risk-assessment tools would be useful. Such tools could also assess heightened risk of various parenting scenarios, as well as possible protection for children.

## **Future Evaluations and Documentation Needed**

As shown in this literature review, some expansion has occurred in the types of programs available to family members experiencing domestic violence, including small group therapy, in-home services, and parent-child dyad counseling. A number of excellent efforts are under way to add parenting content to existing domestic violence interventions or to develop stand-alone parenting programs for perpetrators or victims. In particular, efforts to develop fatherhood curricula specifically for domestic violence perpetrators appear to be expanding. It would be useful to create an inventory of such programs, as well as to begin to assess the effectiveness of these programs. Early indications show positive outcomes for the participants of these programs. Further research documenting outcomes for program participants could indicate whether such programs should be widely implemented. Further evaluation and analysis is needed for programs with high drop-out rates. For innovative programs, it is essential to implement a research strategy of describing the programs, conducting a process and outcome evaluation, and using findings for program refinement or redesign.

The use of supervised visitation for various family types is growing, including for families with issues of domestic violence. While this is a promising practice, it is important to continue to evaluate such programs for safety and effectiveness.

Overall, the past decade has witnessed a steadily growing interest in the impact of domestic violence on children. Very recently this interest has changed to test assumptions about the parenting of both perpetrators and victims. There is also interest in better assessment and intervention through education and support efforts. Research is needed to evaluate and further refine evidence-based programs and policies.